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ABSTRACT

To determine the utility of the commonly taught phonics rule "if the only vowel in a word is at the end of that word, it usually stands for a long sound," a study evaluated all of the single syllable entries in the "New Grolier Webster International Dictionary of the English Language." When the letter "y" was considered a vowel, 72 words were found of which 55% could be correctly pronounced using the rule. However, when all the cases in which "y" was the only vowel were discarded, the utility of the remaining 57 words was only 44%. Analysis of these 57 words revealed that 28 were words with a high frequency of use. Analysis of these words indicated that only half could be correctly pronounced when the rule was applied--a utility of 50%. These results suggest that the phonics rule at issue is highly misleading to children and should not be taught. (JD)

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A STUDY OF THE PRONUNCIATION OF SINGLE-SYLLABLE WORDS HAVING THE ONLY VOWEL AS THE FINAL LETTER

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This article reports research on the usefulness of the phonics rule:

> "If the only vowel letter is at the end of a word, that letter usually stands for a long sound" (hereafter written "the CC$\overline{V}$ rule").

This is one of the most widely taught phonic rules in early first grade. As with all phonic rules, there is no information available about any research that served as the origin of this rule. It has, however, been the subject of six phonic utility studies, the first two done by Clymer and all of the rest patterned on his design (Clymer 1961).

The Previous Research

Clymer used a list of 2600 words taken from the vocabularies of four basic series, grades one through four, and from Gates Reading Vocabulary for Primary Grades. In that list of 2600, he located 27 words which had the only vowel as the final letter, and of these, 78% (or 6 words) correctly could be pronounced using the CC$\overline{V}$ rule (Clymer 1961). In very similar research using a similar list, he located 31 words, 74% of which (or 23 words) correctly could be pronounced using that rule (Clymer 1963).

Bailey used a list of 5,773 words taken from reading vocabularies of eight basic series, grades one through six. She found 38 words which had the only vowel as the final letter, and of these, 76% (or 29 words) correctly could be pronounced using the CC$\overline{V}$ rule (Bailey 1967).

Emans' list of 1,944 words was a 10% random sample of all the words, grades five and above, in The Teacher's Word Book of 30,000 Words (Lorge-Thorndike, 1944). In that list of 1,944 words, he found 3 words, only 33% of which (or 1 word) correctly could be pronounced using the CCV̄ rule (Emans 1967).

Dzama's list of 2,025 words was assembled from a random sample of the sight vocabulary of 225 first graders. She found 21 words which had the only vowel as the final letter and, further, that 76% of them (or 16 words) correctly could be pronounced using the CCV rule (Dzama 1975).

Bieri used a list of 1,495 words taken from Feinstein's Programmed College Vocabulary 3600 (Feinstein 1969). He did not indicate numbers of examples found, but only that none of them correctly could be pronounced using the CCV̄ rule (Bieri, 1977).

These previous research results are summarized in tabular form in Table I which follows:

Table I

Utility of the Phonics Rules, "If Only Vowel Letter is at the End of a Word, That Letter Usually Stands For the Long Sound," as Found By Previous Researchers.

Researcher	Total # of Such Words in Sample	# Not Conforming	# Conforming to Rule	Percent of Utility
Clymer (1961)	27	6	21	78%
Clymer (1963)	31	8	23	74%
Bailey (1967)	38	9	29	76%
Emans (1967)	3	2	1	33%
Dzama (1975)	21	5	16	76%
Bieri (1977)[1]				0%

[1]Bieri reported only percent of utility.

The New Research

The research done by the author of this article used the 138,000 entries in the New Grolier Webster International Dictionary of the English Language. Previous researchers did not indicate whether the letter y was considered a vowel or not, as some still do not consider it. In this research, the word counts were done both ways.

All of the single syllable words in which the only vowel is at the end were listed, and then it was determined whether or not they conformed to the rule, according to the pronunciation shown in the dictionary. If any one of alternate pronunciations conformed, the word was considered as conforming.

The results of this study are shown in tabular form in Table II which follows.

Table II

Utility of the Phonic Rule, "If the Only Vowel Letter Is At the End of a Word, That Letter Usually Stands For the Long Sound

	Total # of Such Words in Sample	# Not Conforming	# Conforming to Rule	Percent of Utility
Considering Y as a vowel	72	32	40	55%
15 of the above 72 which have Y as only vowel	15	0	15	100%
Not considering Y as a vowel	57	32	25	44%
28 of the above 57 that are high frequency words	28	14	14	50%
29 of the 57 that are low frequency words	29	18	11	38%

When the letter "y" was considered as being a vowel, 72 words were found, 55% of which (or 40 words) correctly could be pronounced using the $CC\overline{V}$ rule.

However, it should be noted that in the above 72 words, there were 15 words with the only vowel being the ending "y." These 15 words should be the subject of a special rule, e.g., "When the only vowel in a word is a final "y," it has the long sound (or the sound of long i)," which would have 100% accuracy. They should be removed from the list of words used to determine the utility of the rule under study.

So removing them, and also considering "y" not to be a vowel, there were 57 words which had their only vowel as the final letter. Of these, 44% (or 25 words) correctly could be pronounced using the $CC\overline{V}$ rule.

A further look at these 57 words reveals that only 28 of them are words of high frequency of use, the other 29 are of very low frequency, some not even recognized as words by the average person. Even when using the rule on only those 28 words of high frequency of use, the percent of utility is 50%--only 14 of the 28 correctly can be pronounced using the rule.

All of the researchers indicate there are very few of these "only-vowel-the-final-letter" words. This research located only 72 throughout the entire listing of 138,000 plus words. It is interesting to note that Clymer and Bailey had almost half of them in their limited early grade word lists.

Everyone seems surprised at the small number of words to which this rule pertains, and people seem reluctant to believe it. If proper research had been done before the rule was made, this would be no surprise. I know of no one who has any knowledge about any research that originally produced this rule years ago, nor for any other phonics rule, for that matter. They all appear to be unfounded assumptions that appeared from various unknown sources, and that were believed without any challenge. This view is supported by Silvaroli in his comments on the impact of Clymer's research (Gentile, et al, 1983).

However, the real surprise is the fact that the rule subject to study here has been recommended so highly for such a long time, to so many children, without really knowing its worth both in breadth of application and in correctness of results. With it obtaining no more correctness than 44 or 50% on such a small number of words, (57 or 28 respectively) it is a wonder it was ever taught at all.

The conclusion is that here is but another phonics rule children should not be taught to use. It is highly misleading to children to imply by teaching such an incorrect rule that phonic analysis should be used on these words. Committing these words to one's sight vocabulary would be a simple task, would provide perfect accuracy, and be the common sense approach, everything considered.

This research, more than any other that I've done or read so far, points up how ridiculous it is simply to accept unfounded phonics rules as correct and teach them to children.

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